

CONFESSIONS

OF A  
SLOT MACHINE  
QUEEN



A MEMOIR

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*May the Spirits of My Ancestors Be My Guide*

Canewell: Do you gamble?  
I'm looking for a gambling  
woman.

Ruby: Ain't nobody gonna do no gambling.  
You have to gamble by yourself.

—August Wilson, *Seven Guitars*

No more text sex mess  
No more zoot-suit mayors  
shuffling skeletons and abuses  
like gamblers losing pay checks  
in motor city casinos.  
No more boarded-up windows,  
No more broken trees,  
or dilapidated buildings  
where junkies, rodents  
and vermin spring.  
We want our city back.

—Melba Joyce Boyd,  
“We Want Our City Back”



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## PROLOGUE

“I’ll take that in ten hundred-dollar bills,” I said as I handed my voucher to the man behind the cashier’s counter. The Queen had done it again! I hadn’t been in the casino more than thirty minutes and had won \$1,011 on a ten-times-pay machine. The cashier counted out ten crisp hundred-dollar bills, one ten, and a single. I stuffed the single and some change from my pocket in his tip box and neatly folded the hundreds in a little leather wallet I used to keep my gambling money separate from my real money. I always left a small tip for the cashiers whenever I won \$1,000 or more. It was my way of keeping my mojo going, of feeding whatever goddess was blessing me with good luck so she would keep on sending little stacks of hundred-dollar bills my way. As I put my money away, a voice in my head whispered, “You need to leave. Right now. You got what you came for. You have bills to pay. *Leave.*”

But I was on a roll. Not exactly what high rollers would consider a roll, but for most ordinary slot players \$1,000 ain’t nothing to sneeze at. I had brought \$500 with me on this trip, money I could’ve used for something practical, like paying the plumbing bill that had arrived in that day’s mail. Instead, I decided to try my luck just one more time before bringing this adventure in Casinoland to an end once and for all. I had tried it before, after I won \$6,000 for the second time at Ho Chunk Casino, the place where this whole thing started, in Wisconsin, about forty-five miles from my home in Madison. But the lure of the slots was too powerful. This time a \$200 wager had brought me \$1,011, so now I could gamble with the remaining \$300 and still come out ahead. “*Leave now,*” the little voice kept whispering. “*Don’t give the money back.*” I ignored it and proceeded to lose all of it—\$1,300. It didn’t make sense! Even as I pulled the hundred-dollar bills out of my wallet and stuck them in the machines, I kept asking myself, “What the hell are you doing?” But the machines kept beckoning, blinking their lights, calling out to all the slot junkies

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wandering around like zombies as they looked for the “right one” to feed. I felt sick as I pulled bill after bill out of my wallet and stuck them in one machine after another. They were greedy, especially the Jeopardy machine, which made an irritating slurping sound every time I hit the Bet Max button.

By the time I was down to my last two hundred-dollar bills, my hands were shaking. I had started sweating but blamed it on a sudden hot flash. My stomach ached from tension. My physical reactions were warning me that I was engaging in a dangerous activity. But I kept right on giving the money back and pretending it didn't matter. Pretending there was plenty more where that came from. As I wandered through the casino toward the exit pretending not to have a care in the world, a slot attendant greeted me as I passed her. “You look very pretty tonight. I noticed you when you walked in. I hope you're having some luck.” I put on my diva smile and thanked her. I wasn't surprised that she had noticed me when I made my entrance. I was one of only a handful of black people in the casino that night: a middle-aged black woman clad in black, expensive gold jewelry gleaming in the artificial light. Yeah, I stood out. I just hoped my stride wouldn't betray the weakness I felt in my legs as I made my way through the exit.

As I drove home I vowed, once again, to stop this charade, to lay down my crown before it was too late. It was taking too much energy to preside over this bizarre fairyland, even in my imagination. This was it. I was never going back.

I crawled into my bed exhausted, my mind drifting back to a spring afternoon when I had decided to do something really out of the ordinary and went gambling. I got lucky that day, and suddenly my orderly existence turned into a private hell. After tossing and turning and sighing to myself for I don't know how long, I fell asleep. The slurping sounds and blinking lights of the Jeopardy machines invaded my dreams.



# PART ONE





## CHAPTER 1

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### Ho Chunk

Bewildering. That's the only way to describe my behavior after a trip to Ho Chunk Casino in the spring of 2005 brought me a quick \$1,100 win. Before I realized what was happening, I had gone from having no interest in casinos and gambling to thinking about nothing else. In fact, the few times I had been in casinos before April 30, 2005, I found them nauseating. Too much noise, too many gaudy lights, too much smoke, and too many people engaging in what I thought was a really stupid activity—putting money into machines and watching the reels spin round and round. And the people seemed to have the same strained look on their faces, as if their lives depended on the outcome of those spinning reels. So when my friend Bev called that day and invited me to go to Ho Chunk with her, I told her what I usually told people who asked me to go gambling with them: “No. I don't like casinos. I even went to Monte Carlo, and that's supposed to be the most famous casino in the world and didn't like it, so I'm not about to go to *that* place.” But this time all I got out was, “No, I don't like casinos,” before I heard myself saying, “You know what? Yeah. Come and pick me up. Let's go.”

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Bev had caught me at a vulnerable moment. For months I had been dealing with the death of a long relationship. It had not been easy. There were days when I felt listless, when all the things I once found emotionally and intellectually fulfilling—teaching, writing, working out, sailing and wind surfing on Lake Mendota—were not enough to ease the pain of losing the man I had deceived myself into believing was some kind of poetic genius. He was hateful. For years I put up with his hatefulness in exchange for the increasingly rare moments when he was charming, kind, witty, and stimulating, both intellectually and sexually. We parted in August 2004. Now, nine months later, I was still trying to clean up the emotional wreckage I had become, a result not only of the breakup but also of looking deeper into myself than I had ever dared to do before. Teaching helped. I also managed to fill up two or three evenings a week with various academic and artistic committee meetings. But the semester would end in two weeks and I was worried. What then?

When the poet left, he took his share of the household income. Although he told me to call if I needed anything, I wasn't about to let him know that my financial situation was tight. I told him that I'd get along just fine. But I hadn't saved enough from the nine-month salary I'm paid as a university professor to get through the summer. My second stream of income, from acting and commercial print modeling jobs, had dwindled to a trickle, the result of advertisers tightening their budgets and celebrities taking over the commercials market. Not to mention that I'm *une femme d'une certaine age*, that is, middle aged. And a black woman. My demographic wasn't exactly going to bring in big bucks for hungry advertisers seeking new ways to place their clients' products. That's why I agreed to go to Ho Chunk that Saturday afternoon. I needed my friend's company to help me pull out of a deep and funky mood. Another reason was that this excursion offered a brief escape from the world of academia, a world into which I never quite fit. After more than twenty years at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, first as a graduate student in the Department of Comparative Literature and